

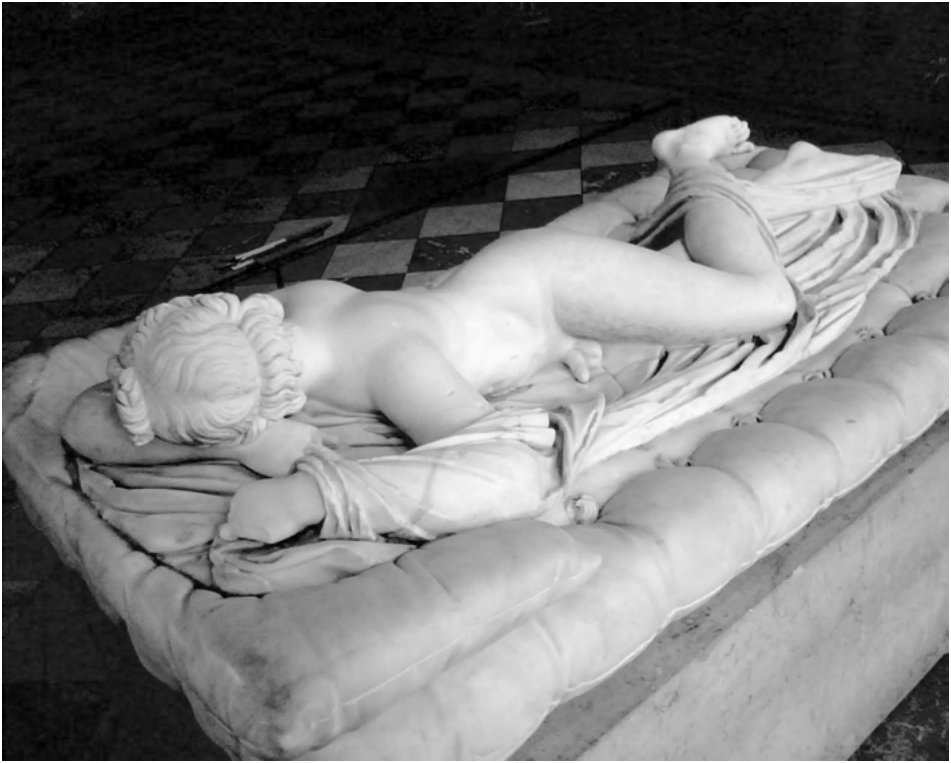
## AESTHETIC AMBIVALENCE

In the winter of 1788 Johann Gottfried Herder visited the Villa Borghese. He left us an unusually frank account of viewing the Borghese Hermaphrodite (*fig. 41*), in which he noted how the soft modelling, sensuous posture and gender ambiguity of the statue aroused him sexually:

Das rechte Bein, das auf der Decke liegt, dehnt sich gleichsam, sie sanft zu berühren, das Knie etwas vorwärts. Wade, Bein, u. Fuß sind sanft angespannt, u. mit dem Zeh hebt er spannend die Decke, die vom linken aufgelegten Fuß herunterläuft. Eine ungemein wollüstige Stellung [...].<sup>244</sup>

The lifelikeness and virtuosity of carving enticed Michel de Cubières, who saw the Hermaphrodite again a few years later, into an erotic engagement with the statue. When he became aware of its sexual ambiguity he became afraid and lost his poise, nourished by a mastery of the viewing competences shaped by the rhetorical tradition of *ekphrasis*. Whereas in his case enjoying the fiction of *enargeia* was disrupted by the unclear gender of the statue and changed into fear, for Herder it changed into a mixture of fascination and discomfort that he translated into an ethical and aesthetic conflict: one should not entertain adulterous desires, even for a strange statue, and one should not allow aesthetic, disinterested enjoyment to be disrupted by a heightened awareness of the sexual allure of this young body.

In this respect Herder's account is exemplary of the difference in attitude towards viewers reacting to statues as if they were living beings between Germany and France in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas in France such reactions increasingly became the



41 Borghese Hermaphrodite, Roman copy in marble of a Greek bronze original of the second century BC, mattress sculpted by Bernini c. 1620, marble, L. 1.69 m., Paris, Musée du Louvre

domain of ethnography or history of religion, contemporary German treatments of this phenomenon belonged to a different context, that of the new discipline of aesthetics, and showed much more ambivalence, not to say discomfort. Recent ethnographical findings played an important role, but in counterpoint to the new debates that arose after 1750 on the autonomy of art and the aesthetic experience as an expression of the independence of the rational subject.<sup>245</sup>

## PYGMALION'S DREAM

More than a century after Lemée, Herder published an essay on sculpture: *Plastik. Einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildendem Traume*. Where Lemée had attempted to control the agency of images that manifested itself through the confusion of the representation with the living being it represents, by appealing to the political and

religious context of such behaviour, Herder sought an answer in an appeal to aesthetics as the discipline founded on the rational independence of the embodied viewing subject. Herder's essay was published in 1778, but had been largely written in 1768–1770, not in the last place as a reaction to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* of 1766. Both essays start by arguing against the rhetorical and humanist belief in the representational equivalence of painting and poetry in favour of these arts having each their own, unexchangeable character. Herder takes this line of reasoning several steps further by arguing that among the visual arts sculpture and painting are just as fundamentally different: vision can show us only shapes in two dimensions, only touch can grasp them. Painting shows us appearances and narrative; it is a dream, offering narrative magic; but sculpture makes present, and is truth.<sup>246</sup> Herder's attempt to define the borders between these two arts is literally an essay in aesthetics, because it attempts to link the experience of painting, sculpture and music to a particular sense: sight, touch and hearing.

Sculpture in this view has a more immediate effect on the viewer because it can only be properly experienced through touch, preferably in the dark or with closed eyes. Since tactile experience lends itself much less easily to mediation, verbal description or reflection than sight, it is an experience that is much more direct, and closer to the experience of the body of the person who touches a statue than looking at a painting is to the viewer. Looking at a statue will never lead to an adequate understanding that does justice to its three-dimensional corporeality; even worse, just looking at it will reduce it to a series of planes and angles instead of recreating it in the physical experience of touch:

Lasset ein Geschöpf ganz Auge, ja einen Argus mit hundert Augen hundert Jahr eine Bildsäule betrachten: ist er nicht ein Geschöpf, das Hand hat, das einst tasten und wenigstens sich selbst betasten konnte; ein Vogelauge, ganz Schnabel, ganz Blick, ganz Fittig und Klaue, wird nie von diesem Dinge als Vogelansicht haben. Raum, Winkel, Form, Rundung, lerne ich als solche in leibhafter Wahrheit nicht durchs Gesicht erkennen; geschweige das Wesen dieser Kunst, schöne Form, schöne Bildung, die nicht Farbe, nicht Spiel der Proportion, der Symmetrie, des Lichtens und Schattens, sondern dargestellte, tastbare Wahrheit ist.<sup>247</sup>

Real lovers of sculpture will instead try to transform their vision into feeling, and to gaze as if they were trying to find their way in the dark, endlessly changing their position and point of view. Their eye becomes a hand, and the light their fingers. In the end, this intense tactile exploration transforms inanimate matter into a living being:

[...] sein Auge wird Hand, der Lichtstrahl Finger, oder vielmehr seine Seele hat einen noch viel feinern Finger als Hand und Lichtstrahl ist, das Bild aus des Urhebers Arm und Seele in sich zu schaffen. Sie hat's! die Täuschung ist geschehn: es lebt, und sie fühlt, daß es lebe; und nun spricht sie, nicht als ob sie sehe, sondern taste, fühle.<sup>248</sup>

As in the tale of Pygmalion, the statue is transformed under the viewer's gaze into a living being. But in this case there is no need of a divine intervention, only of the capacity to concentrate so powerfully on the experience of one sense that all the senses seem to come together in one tactile sensation, and the viewer can identify completely with the act of the sculptor. Herder here argues against the 18<sup>th</sup>-century consensus on vision which postulates that a viewer does not become directly conscious of visual perception, but only through the mediation of a mental idea or representation of perception. Touch, unlike vision, is an unmediated sense which allows the viewer – although that is not really the right term here – to identify so closely with what he or she experiences that the act of touching becomes a creative reconstitution of the act of the statue's maker. In this experience the boundaries of the self are dissolved, not in abject fear or admiration, but in a creative identification with the artist, which is ultimately based on a shared sense of corporal being. Hence Herder's statement that sculpture is truth and makes present, whereas painting offers only narrative magic. This is shown, Herder continues, by the fact that

Eine Bildsäule kann mich umfassen, daß ich vor ihr knie, ihr Freund und Gespieler werde, sie ist gegenwärtig, sie ist da. Die schönste Malerei ist Roman, Traum eines Traumes.<sup>249</sup>

Sculpture presents itself to the sense of touch, which is more direct and physical than sight. Because of that direct presence it can exert an agency on the viewer that is similar to that of living persons. In other words, in and through tactile sensation the viewer responds to statues as if they are living beings.

By singling out the literally aesthetic aspect of looking at paintings or touching statues Herder articulates in a new manner the experience of inanimate matter dissolving into the living body it represents. But it is the opposite of the traditional rhetorical poetics of *enargeia*, because his focus is not on the object, on how to create a statue that is so lifelike it seems to breathe; nor is its aim the recreation of an experience in the mind of the public. Its aim is to engender, to create, a direct, unmediated *experience* of touching a living body. In the intense experience of exploring a statue's form by letting one's hand wander over it, the subject can only make sense of this experience by relating it to one's own experience of one's body. It is an unreflected, physical experience, a loss of self that results in a complete identification with the statue and through it with the sculptor.

Yet although Herder here created a new way of understanding the experience of a statue becoming alive, he is very critical of idolatry or fetishism, for the fear and horror they inspire are the mark of a primitive mind:

Bei allen Wilden oder Halbwilden sind daher die Statuen belebt, dämonisch, voll Gottheit und Geistes, zumal wenn sie in stille, in heilige Dämmerung angebetet werden, und man ihre Stimme und Antwort erwartet.<sup>250</sup>

Herder employs the same ethnographic evidence to put the aesthetic experience into sharper relief, that Lemée or Guasco used to explain in what manner statues can subdue their viewers into idolatry all over the world, in primitive societies just as in contemporary Paris. The idolatry of primitive people must therefore be distinguished from the Pygmalion experience of enlightened sculpture amateurs. In their case primitive superstition has been replaced by the capacity of infinite aesthetic concentration on tactile experience; loss of self has in fact become the supreme affirmation of the creative self in an experience of beauty and presence. The agency of the statue's presence is controlled here not through the social or ritual context in which it is allowed to exert its effect on the viewer, as in the case of Lemée's defence of the monument of the Place des Victoires, but by transforming the viewers' attitude. They are no longer the object of the ruler's powers as made present in the statue. Hence they are able to change their absorption by the statue into an autonomous aesthetic experience in which there is only room for the sensual experience of the object.

## PETRIFYING STATUE LOVERS

In a letter of 1766 describing the Niobe group (*fig. 42*) Herder's Swiss contemporary Heinrich Füßli shows a comparable ambivalence and struggle to deflect the sexual attraction exercised by a statue into an aesthetic and, in his case, moral appreciation:

Ich gehe in die Villa Medici [...] da staun' ich ungestört eine Gruppe der höchsten weiblichen Schönheiten an. Niobe, meine Geliebte, du schöne Mutter schöner Kinder; du schönste unter den Weibern, wie lieb' ich dich! [...] lernensbegieriger Jüngling, steh mit Bewundrung stille! Das ist kein liebäugelnde Venus. – Furchte dich nicht, sie will nicht deine Sinnen berauschen, sondern deine Seele mit Ehrfurcht berauschen, und deinen Verstand unterrichten: Nimm wahr, die ernste Grazie auf ihrem Gesichte [...] ihre Augen sind nicht, von verliebter Trunkenheit, halb zugeschlossen, ihr Blick nicht schmachtend, sondern unschuldig [...]. Es ist dir vergönnt, Jüngling! athme bey diesem Anblik tiefer herauf, genieße einer reinen Wohllust, und kröne deinen Genuss mit dem stillen Wunsch, eine Gattin zu finden, die diesen Mädchen gleich sey.<sup>251</sup>

The viewer is here admonished not to dwell on Niobe's physical attractions, but to analyse the artistry of the statue. In an almost literal repetition of Pygmalion's appeal to Venus to give him a wife identical to the statue he created, Füßli tries to control the agency of this statue by finding a wife that is similar to a statue – and hence eminently controllable as well. Pygmalion here turns into Medusa, and the desire for a petrified lover becomes the ultimate implication of employing aesthetic response as a defence mechanism against the desires statues can excite.



42 Daughter of Niobe [Roman copy, possibly after Scopas and Praxiteles, formerly in the garden of the Villa Medici in Rome, Florence: Uffizi. Drawing by Willem Doudijn, engraving by Jan de Bisschop, published in *Signorum Veterum Icones*, The Hague 1671.

Aesthetic defence mechanisms and ambivalences also sound through Goethe's accounts of the uncanny and persistent fascination the Medusa Rondanini exercised on him, (*fig. 43*).<sup>252</sup> Thus he wrote about the recently discovered Medusa mask in the Rondanini collection:

Gegen uns über im Palast Rondanini steht eine Medusenmaske, wo, in einer hohen und schönen Gesichtsform, über Lebensgröße, das ängstliche Starren des Todes unsäglich trefflich ausgedrückt ist. [...]

Ein wundersames Werk, das, den Zwiespalt zwischen Tod und Leben, zwischen Schmerz, Wollust ausdrückend, einen unnennbaren Reiz wie irgend ein anderes Problem über uns ausübt.<sup>253</sup>

The Medusa Rondanini continued to exercise its spell over him throughout the rest of his life. In 1826, at the very end of it, he finally obtained a plaster cast of it from the King of Bavaria, which is still in the Goethe-Haus in Weimar, and occupied a very prominent place

43 Medusa Rondanini, late Hellenistic or Roman copy after a Greek bust of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, marble, 0.29 m., Munich, Glyptothek



among his collection. He also gave her an important role in one of the fragments connected with the second *Faust*, 'Helena's Antecedents', where Medusa figures in Hell, stopping the dead from leaving by her terrible gaze, and the living from entering. But at the end of his life he had forgotten about his uneasy fascination with Medusa when he first saw her in Rome. Instead, in a splendid case of aesthetic defense or *Asthetische Abwehr*, he now called her 'wohlthätig und heilsam.' He added: 'Diesen Anblick, der keineswegs versteinerte sondern den Kunstsinn höchlich und herrlich belebte'. In an ironic passage the novelist Jean Paul Richter alludes to this atmosphere when writing about his preparations for a visit to Goethe's home:

[...] bloß Kunstsachen wärmen noch seine Herznerven an (daher ich Knebel bat, mich vorher durch einen Mineralbrunnen zu petrifizieren und zu inkrustieren, damit ich ihm etwa im vortheilhaften Lichte einer Statue zeigen könnte. [...]) Ich gieng, ohne Wärme, bloß aus Neugierde. Sein Haus (Pallast) frappiert [...] ein Pantheon voll Bilder und Statuen, eine Kühle der Angst presset die Brust.<sup>254</sup>

Petrifaction here is no longer the ultimate form of agency. It has instead become the final implication of the aesthetic response as a way of dealing with the desire, ambivalence and fear statues can excite.

## GOETHE'S GALLERY OF ART LOVERS

Setting apart the adoration of cult images from the aesthetic appreciation by the art lover, is also an important theme in Goethe's *Der Sammler und die Seinigen*, published in *Propyläen* in 1799.<sup>255</sup> Ostensibly an informal series of letters by a collector to the editors of the journal about collecting, and the various characters of artists and art lovers, it is in fact a very nifty summary of Goethe's ideas about art and its reception by the viewer. It is also shot through with living presence responses presented as various identifications and confusions between an image and what it represents. Many of such responses occur in Goethe's work, from the painter in *Des Künstlers Erdewallen*, written in 1774, who wants to embrace a statue of Venus Urania with the 'violence of a bridegroom', to the accounts in the *Italian Journey* that are pervaded with ambivalence of the cult of the Minerva Giustiniani, or his infatuation with the statue of a muse from Palazzo Caraffa Colombiano in Naples.<sup>256</sup>

The cases of identifying an image with the living being it represents that occur in *Der Sammler und die Seinigen*, however, do not share the erotic character of the majority of such responses in Goethe's work. Instead they are all the manifestation of a desire not to make present absent lovers, but to bring back the dead. In this short book Goethe not only summarizes a century of idolatry criticism, he also makes explicit a hitherto relatively minor element in such responses that would become, as we shall see in the next chapters, increasingly important in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The letters making up this novella begin with a history of the collection which the main narrator, a doctor, inherited from his father, but quickly move on to a catalogue of artistic genres concerned with representing the living and dead, ranging from cut-out lifesize figures presented as if they are part of a tableau vivant and portraits of all sizes, to plaster casts and wax portraits after living sitters or coffin portraits, to more indirect portraits of the dead by means of still lifes representing their favourite attributes.

The collection was founded by the narrator's grandfather; his father had added to the collection, starting with precise imitations of natural objects, but moving on to portraits of himself and his family, preferably in life size, 'akkurat wie er sich im Spiegel sah'. Here the theme of the relation between images and what they represent is announced for the first time. After the attempts of a painter trained in the French school, which did not please the narrator's father because they did not come sufficiently close to the sitters' appearance, a young German painter was more successful. He portrayed the sister not with much taste, but very much as she looked when she went into the garden, thus reaching 'die höchsten Wahrheit der Nachahmung'. The painter went on to paint not only the entire family, but its entire household. He and the narrator's sister fell in love and married.<sup>257</sup>

In a first questioning of the borders between images and what they represent the painter portrays the narrator's parents lifesize, but placed in a door opening behind a door, as if they had just come home. In the next, the painting suffers the same fate as living bodies: it decays through the influence of the weather: 'so fand man nach einem strengen Winter [...]



Vater und Mutter völlig zerstört, worüber wir uns um so mehr betrübten, als wir sie schon vorher durch den Tod verloren hatten'.<sup>258</sup>

Death, and funerary images, then become increasingly prominent. First plaster casts and wax images of the family are made, but the narrator dares not to show the 'phantom' image of his father, complete with wig and damasque dressing gown, sitting behind a curtain. The painter painted his dead wife in her coffin; but he also made still lives with her favourite possessions. These small, mute images did not lack coherence or even speech. Unable to forget his loss and only capable of seeing the present as a constant reminder of his bereavement he became very melancholic, and the last painting he made was yet another still life of his own possessions which all suggested transitoriness and separation, but also a reunion. Soon afterwards he died.

This transference of feelings for persons unto their possessions continues in the treatment the narrator's cousins give to the images they receive: Julie, who often takes over from the narrator, receives a set of Heinrich Füßli's works ('diese elfenhaften Luftbilder [...] diese durch einanderziehenden und beweglichen Träume'). It is an interesting choice, given Füßli's interest in sexual deviation and Goethe's collection of erotic images by him. Her sister receives from her absent bridegroom coloured etchings of happy families.<sup>259</sup>

After the editors of *Propyläen*, that is Goethe and Schiller, have paid the narrator a visit during which he has shown them not only the portraits of his family, but also his cousins, the 'lebendige Familienbilder', the subject changes from collecting art to drawing up a catalogue of artists, connoisseurs and amateurs. The first category among these are the imitators ('Nachahmer') whose main ambition is to make as exact a reproduction as possible; they do not rest until they have replaced the object of representation by its image. His father and uncle's collecting clearly fell into this category, with their sole interest in faithful portraiture. But this observation is also the foundation for Goethe's analysis or diagnosis of what we would call image fetishism – the transference of emotions from the person who is or should be their object to inanimate possessions belonging to them – and which is such an insistent pattern in the elder generations' dealing with death and art. In the fetishist replacement of persons by their images as the object of affection that characterizes the family life of the Collector, works of art should replace what they represent; thereby they lose their autonomy. In fact the title of the book already alludes to this theme: 'die Seinigen' turn out to be as much the collector's friends and family as – increasingly – his collection.

This point is further pursued when a new guest enters, an unknown connoisseur who is simply named 'the Guest'. This figure was probably based on Alois Hirt, who in 1809 became the first professor of archaeology at the new university of Berlin, and made the first design for what would become the Altes Museum, one of the first public art galleries housing a royal collection.<sup>260</sup> He has an argument with the young philosopher who also stays at the house of the collector, and who is the voice of Schiller's view, about the highest aim of art. The guest believes that the aim of art is not beauty but 'das charakteristische', and argues

against Lessing and Winckelmann that classical art is not exclusively concerned with beauty or silent grandeur: the cries, spasms and distortions of Laocoön, Niobe's grief, the bald heads of barbarians or damaged skin and weak muscles of old people all show that the ancients' main concern was to express the characteristic, their aim truth not beauty. Goethe seems to argue here against Lessing, who had argued that when the expression of emotions dominates in a work of art, its aesthetic and artistic character suffers. To illustrate this point he quotes an epigram by Philippus from the *Anthologia Graeca* in which the viewer is so outraged by a painting of Medea killing her children that he wants to send her to the executioner; which for Lessing indicates both a mistake on the part of the artist and the viewer. The artist has destroyed the artistic, that is representational character of his work by making it too vivid, which causes the viewer to ignore this character.<sup>261</sup>

The philosopher objects to this that the subject matter of a work of art or tragedy may be unbearable, but that its artistic treatment redeems this. The flaw in the guest's argument is that he confuses artistic representation with the events or situations represented.<sup>262</sup> To judge whether art's aim should be truth or beauty, he suggests that we consider the point where its reception and creation meet, that is, in the human mind, and look at the origins of art in human emotions and desires. When man feels love for an object or a living being, and the desire or instinct (*Trieb*) to imitate it, he begins to make images of the object of his affections. To achieve this, he may establish an ideal pattern; but to create a work of art that satisfies his emotional needs, beauty is needed, which is the only thing that lends life and warmth to the general idea established on the basis of scientific study. Thus artistic creation begins with love or desire of an individual, passes through a stage of scientific comparison to establish an ideal pattern, but in the end results in the creation of a living, beautiful work of art. The foundation of all this is the innate desire to represent what we feel vividly and experience, as an artist, but also as a viewer:

Ein schönes Kunstwerk hat den ganzen Kreis durchlaufen, es ist nun wieder eine Art Individuum, das wir mit Neigung umfassen, das wir uns zueignen können. [...] Wer fühlt lebhaft ohne den Wunsch das Gefühlte darzustellen?<sup>263</sup>

These same ideas on the difference, essential to art, between an object of desire and its representation are repeated, but in a comic way, in the visit described by Julie in the seventh letter. Some noble acquaintances come to see the collections, but when Julie shows one of their most precious possessions, a cabinet with a painting of a reclining Venus, the lady is shocked that Julie is not offended by her nakedness. In an ironic twist Goethe shows us a viewer in a museum situation who cannot differentiate between viewing an actual person and viewing her image, nor choose the appropriate viewing attitude.<sup>264</sup>

Goethe here gives us a polyphony of artists and viewers identifying, or confusing, images with what they represent. He also brings to the surface the emotional basis of such identifications in misattributed emotions, grief seeking consolation in the objects the dead

left behind, or desire making the viewer love the image as much as what it represents; and he suggests the implications of such identifications for the concept of art.

## ART FETISHISM

Indeed we find here the basic elements of a theory of fetishism applied no longer exclusively to non-Western believers and their idols but to European art viewers. Before 1800, it is extremely rare to find Western art lovers accused of fetishism; the notion was restricted to the adoration of cult objects by non-Western and primitive societies, which were not considered to be works of art.<sup>265</sup> We also find here an aesthetic dialectic in which the representational character of images is considered as the foundation of their status as works of art because they are ultimately an expression of human freedom. The deaths of Laocoon or Niobe are horrifying, almost too terrible to look at in reality; but their representation in sculpture or tragedy is made bearable, and even the object of aesthetic enjoyment, because they are representations, which must keep an uneasy balance between vividness and aesthetic distancing, between reality effects and framing.

In fact Goethe here achieves the reversal of the rhetorical tradition, in which, as we have seen, vivid representation was considered as the height of persuasive power, which deprived the spectator of his or her autonomy, but at the same time made manifest the orator's freedom to exercise his talents to persuade. Here, on the contrary, it is the awareness of the representational character of art which serves as the basis of the subject's freedom. In a few pages, we find here a sketch of what would become one of the major preoccupations of Aby Warburg, and following him Julius von Schlosser and David Freedberg: how to resist the dangerous fascination of images by creating a space in which to reflect; a *Denkraum* as Warburg would call it. In his early manuscript notes for a psychology of art he noted: 'Du schaust mich an, aber das tut kein weh' – you gaze at me, but that does not hurt'.<sup>266</sup> Later on, in the same collection of fragments written between 1888 and 1905, he concluded that our act of mental distancing from the image helps us to become aware of ourselves as an independent, viewing subject, and thereby master the image's agency.<sup>267</sup>

Without explicitly labelling them, Goethe presents all varieties of the veneration of objects catalogued by De Brosses and Guasco: the veneration of the images and masks of forebears; funerary portraits; stagings of the dead as if they are returning; and fetishism proper in the sense of attributing to objects emotions and desires that should be directed at persons. Underlying all these varieties of veneration there is the confusion of the sign with what it signifies. It is not quite clear when, and how Goethe became acquainted with the 18<sup>th</sup>-century studies on fetishism. He started to use the term 'fetishism' from 1800 onwards, particularly in his scientific writings and letters between 1814 and 1828, but he may have read the travel accounts by Bosman, published in 1704 and translated into German in 1708, or the German translation of De Brosses published in 1785. He was also

in touch with Christoph Meiners, the author of the first German discussion of fetishism based on De Brosse, in his *Grundriß der Geschichte aller Religionen* published in 1785. In *Der Verfasser teilt die Geschichte seiner botanischen Studien mit* of 1817 for instance, Goethe describes how during his visit to the botanical gardens of Padua in 1786 he first conceived the idea of the metamorphosis of plants, and asked a keeper to cut off the parts of a palm that had given him this idea. He carried these specimens with him:

Sie liegen wie ich sie damals mitgenommen, noch wohlbehalten vor mir und ich ver-ehre sie als Fetische, die meine Aufmerksamkeit zu erregen und fesseln völlig geeignet mir eine gedeihliche Folge meiner Bemühungen zuzusagen scheinen.<sup>268</sup>

As in *Der Sammler*, this botanical fetish serves as embodied memory. In *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* fetishism is also a recurrent motif, with a similar commemorative connotation.<sup>269</sup> Be this as it may, in *Der Sammler und die Seinigen* Goethe turns the rhetorical view of vivid representation as the summum of persuasive power, in which the conscious, free exercise of artistic skill deprives the audience of its critical autonomy, on its head. Here the awareness by the viewer of the representational nature of art serves as the foundation of her autonomy.

It would take another ten years after Goethe's novella appeared before the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge would say in so many words that fetishism is a universal human characteristic:

Could we emancipate ourselves from the bedimmed influences of custom, and the transforming witchcraft of early association, we should see as numerous tribes of Fetish Worshipers in our streets of London and Paris, as we have on the coasts of Africa.<sup>270</sup>

The French Jesuit historian of religion Dulaure, who also recorded the idolatry lavished on the monument to Louis XIV on the Place des Victoires, was even more sweeping in 1805:

All things, and even all words, spoken or written, to which one attributes a miraculous force foreign to their essence and contrary to the laws of nature, must belong to fetishism.<sup>271</sup>

This is not only a clear definition of fetishism in terms of the attribution of supernatural agency, but also an implicit extension of the range of possible fetishes to everything under the sun, including European works of art.

## KANT'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL BARRIER AGAINST FETISHISM

The scientific study of fetishism and the philosophical discipline of aesthetics were both born in the 1750s: *Du culte des dieux fétiches* was published in 1760; Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten published his *Aesthetica* in 1750. As we have seen, the book by De Brosses is a contribution to the new rationalist and critical study of religion. Baumgarten defined the aesthetic judgment as founded in the autonomous exercise of the human subject's faculties of experience and reason, and thus separated it from religious sentiment. Nonetheless aesthetics and fetish studies have in common their effort to master the impact of what one might call excessive objects, including non-European cult images and classical statues, which exercise an agency over their viewers that exceeds their materiality or formal qualities – resulting in what William Pietz recently called 'our passionate apprehension of sensuously material objects'.<sup>272</sup>

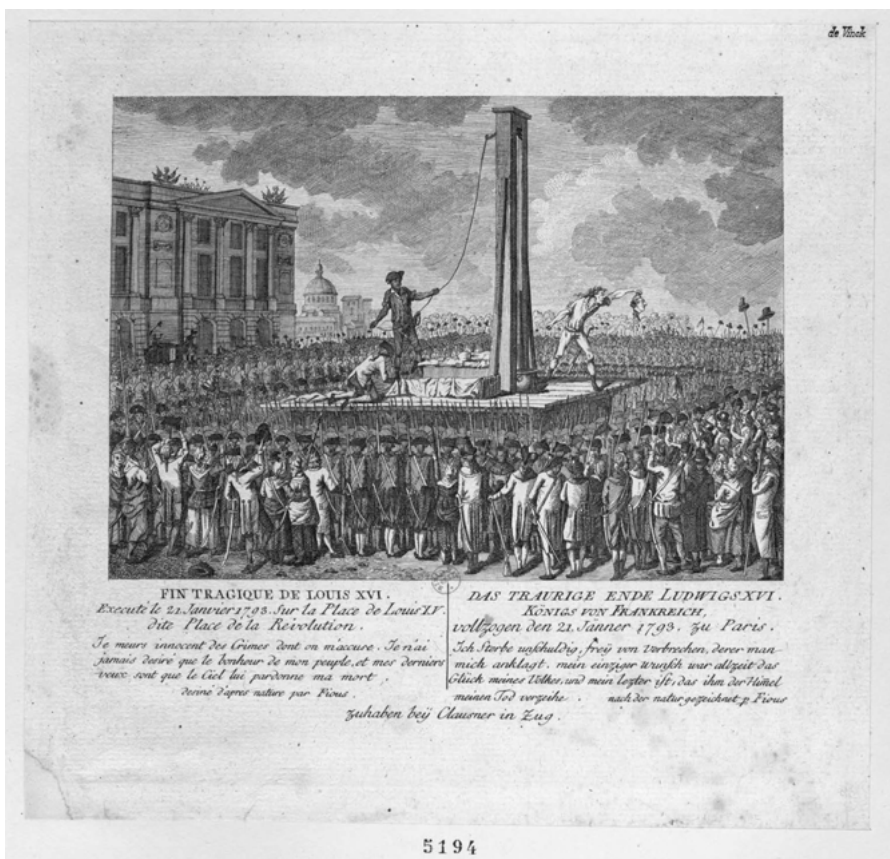
Perhaps not accidentally, in the very decade in which Kant published his *Critique of Judgment*, arguing for an aesthetics of disinterested enjoyment as the ultimate expression of the autonomy the human rational mind can attain, the Medusa motif enjoyed a new lease of life, both in the neoclassical art of Canova, and in the popular art produced by the French Revolution. The attitudes of the henchman in the print by Arcangelo Magini after Beau, holding up Canova's Perseus (1790–1801), and Louis XVI's decapitated head show a troubling similarity (figs 44 and 45).<sup>273</sup> The French Revolution exacerbated the contrast between the political uses of art and such arguments for its autonomy and aesthetic appreciation. Kant's *Critique* may accordingly be read as a manoeuvre to contain art's agency, and particularly the agency of sculpture, with its historical roots in the cult images of primitive religion.

The first part of Kant's book, the *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, identified teleological unity or *Zweckmäßigkeit* as the defining characteristic of living organisms; but it also limited the range of objects or organisms to which one can attribute such unity without falling prey to unfounded projections. The critical rationalism of De Brosses and Hume, and Kant's critique of any unfounded attribution of *Zweckmäßigkeit* to artefacts or objects are both part of the Enlightenment project to refute the attribution of life and agency to inanimate objects, be they cult images or classical statues. Human reason, according to Kant, is aware of the human tendency to attribute fitness for purpose or *Zweckmäßigkeit* to the products of nature, but is at the same time also aware that these are only hypotheses needed to form adequate knowledge of such objects. Or, put in the terms of Kant's epistemology, such attribution is a condition for the possibility of obtaining rational knowledge of natural organisms. Without going into all the epistemological details of the reasoning that brings Kant to this conclusion, it is important to note that for Kant in any aesthetic experience of nature and art, whether it be of sublime or beautiful objects, the *Ding an sich* remains fundamentally unknowable; we only have access to our own experiences or representations of it.



44 Antonio Canova (1757–1822), *Perseus*, marble, 1790, 2.20 m., New York, Metropolitan Museum

Fetishism operates on the basis of a similar attribution of characteristics associated with life to inanimate objects, but in that case the spectator is not aware of the hypothetical character of these attributions. Unlike the adorer of fetishes, who believes that the tree trunk or shell he adores is alive and can act, the rational, enlightened and autonomous subject Kant has in mind is capable of aesthetic enjoyment. This is directed only at the formal properties of an object of art or nature and abstracts from its practical use, monetary value, or capacity to inspire fear or desire. In the aesthetic experience, all feelings of love, hate, fear or desire have been left behind or left out, in the sense that aesthetic enjoyment consists of the enjoyment of the harmonious and free interplay of our cognitive powers and senses. The symbol, or manifestation, of this aesthetic attitude is the museum, where works of art, deprived of their religious status, of their life and death, are exposed to the gaze only of the art lover, and protected by their glass cases from his or her desires and fears.



45 Arcangelo Magini (17??–18??), Fin tragique de Louis XIV, engraving, 1793

Recent studies of fetishism often present Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) as a fundamental deconstruction of the attribution of life or agency to art or cult objects. In the final chapter of his study on wax images, later published under the title *Tote Blicke* (1910–11), Julius von Schlosser had already shown how the formalism of German academic art history with its Kantian conceptual underpinning had made an understanding of the function and agency of such funerary images almost impossible. His arguments were taken up in the 1980s and 1990s by David Freedberg, W.J.T. Mitchell and William Pietz.<sup>274</sup> The latter takes the most radical position, arguing that one of the aims of the *Critique of Judgment* was to refute the attribution to inanimate objects of traits characterizing life.

But when one considers Kant's own work a bit more closely, things turn out to be more complex. Two of his books address fetishism directly, the early, pre-critical *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen* (1764) and the late *Die Religion innerhalb der*

*bloßen Grenzen der Vernunft* (1793). In the first work, more of an essay in *Schreibtsch-anthropologie* using Burke's *Enquiry* than an independent contribution to an aesthetics of the sublime, the black inhabitants of Africa are denied any sublime experience because of their innate tendency to frippery and frivolity: they are too *läppisch*, too frivolous, to experience the elevated feelings connected with the sublime. Their adoration of fetishes is a similar expression or symptom of their *Läppschkeit*, because they adore the most insignificant *objets trouvés*: mussel shells, feathers, bits of plants and bones of animals.<sup>275</sup> In the second, the topic of fetishism is introduced as an example of religion – or rather, superstition – which is based not on a moral desire to lead a virtuous life, which is the sign of intellectual and ethical autonomy, but on the superstitious belief or fear that the will of God can be swayed through the rigorous observation of rites, penance etc, or by making fetishes that can serve to act upon the deity.<sup>276</sup>

Both treatments of fetishism limit themselves to religious and anthropological aspects. But they share with the *Critique of Judgment*'s treatment of the sublime the same concern for the autonomy of the human mind. In the early *Beobachtungen*, the capacity for such autonomous reasoning is sought in racial or national characteristics. In the late *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der Vernunft* (1793) the basis of true religion is the desire for a virtuous life is the expression of the same critical faculties that led in the *Critique of Judgment* to an awareness of the difference between the purposiveness inherent in artifacts and the one attributed to natural organisms.

The connection between the unjustified attribution of inherent purposiveness to artefacts or works of art and the equally unwarrantable attribution of life or agency to images is not primarily based on a concern with art. This is shown by Kant's discussion of the Mosaic law against idolatry. He cites this in the *Critique of Judgment* as one of the most sublime passages in the Pentateuch, because precisely by forbidding the Jews to make images of their God, their imagination or *Einbildungskraft* is not fettered. But as the context of this passage shows, Kant's primary aim here is not to legislate appropriate response to art, but to show how for the enlightened mind religion or morals no longer need images. In a complete reversal of the rhetorical tradition similar to the one Goethe operated, images lead to idolatry because they hinder the subject's rational self-determination.<sup>277</sup>

This is even clearer in the conclusion to a very late work, *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie* (1796), where Kant illustrated the difference between his critical philosophy and the direct or intellectual apprehension of pure Ideas such as God by presenting a veiled image of Isis, goddess of nature, to whose law both parties bend their knee (*fig. 46*).<sup>278</sup> But the adherent of direct apprehension of Ideas – or 'Afterplato' – wants to make the veil of the goddess so thin that even though he cannot lift it, he nonetheless will be able to discern her body through it. This might be interpreted as an allusion to living presence response. But again, the issue that Kant addresses is not a response to art or even its legislation, but the epistemological and ethical problem of the demarcation of rational judgment and intuition, knowledge and belief, and ultimately





46 Louis-Ernest Barrias (1841–1905), *La Nature se dévoilant devant la Science*, 1899, marble and polychrome onyx, 2.00 m., Paris, Musée d'Orsay

enlightened freedom or benighted superstition.<sup>279</sup> A comparison of this illustration to the passage where the inscription on the temple of Isis is cited in the *Critique of Judgment* to illustrate the impossibility to reduce aesthetic ideas to concepts also suggests that Kant's concern was not with aesthetics, but with ethics and the theory of knowledge.

That is, Kant nowhere connected fetishism with the agency of images or art in the way Pietz and others have recently suggested. The literal attribution of life unto art does not figure in his aesthetic work. But he did construct an epistemological foundation for the autonomy of art and the aesthetic judgment. Through that foundation, and through his distinction between the finality or *Zweckmäßigkeit* attributed to works of nature and to human artifacts he also erected, so to speak, a logical and conceptual barrier against fetishism or living presence response. According to Kant, we can no longer reasonably hold that objects may possess the same agency or animation as living beings.

## CONCLUSION

The refusal or sometimes incapacity to distinguish between the image and what it represents is an important element of Lemée's apology for the idolatry lavished on the monument for Louis XIV. In his reluctance to condemn such reactions, and his interpretation of idolatry combining a semiotic analysis with ethnographical data that replaces traditional theological and rhetorical views, he announces 18<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment studies of fetishism. When De Brosses stated that the fetishism of Caribbean or African tribes of his own day was identical to that of ancient Egyptians or Greeks, he condemned these people and their cults to a primitive present without history or development. De Guasco attempted to write the history of statues adored as the divinities they represented, but succeeded only in giving these objects a historical context by tracing the development from aniconic objects to statues using the human form to represent the god. Viewers' reactions remained fixed in an eternal present, deprived of history. Herder and Goethe, as we have seen, also refused to admit such responses into the repertoire of accepted reactions to art that would become part of the new discipline of academic art history.

Fetishism replaced idolatry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the concept under which identifications of an image with what it represents were categorized. Like the idolatry discussed by Lemée, it presents two aspects: projection and personification. The fetishist projects all kinds of qualities usually reserved for living beings, including supernatural agency, to a lifeless object; as a result the fetish is considered and treated as a living person. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century studies discussed here offered several explanations for such projection and the resulting treatment of objects as if they were living persons. They assumed the credulity of the primitive mind, whether in darkest Africa or the earliest stages of ancient Egyptian and Greek civilisation, and the cunning of priests who realized that a persuasive representation of the gods would enhance their power over the minds of the believers. Similar responses by Western viewers were increasingly dismissed from the range of acceptable behavior, and either excused as the expression of grief and mourning, or dismissed as a misunderstanding of the aesthetic attitude required by the enlightened towards works of art.

We can therefore observe a double development. On one side, traditional reactions, formed by the rhetorical interest in *enargeia*, claiming that statues seem to move or breathe; or rather, are transformed in the experience of the spectator into a living being capable of feeling and acting, are dismissed in the proto-ethnographic studies of Lemée and the religion critiques by De Brosses and De Guasco. Such responses are no longer the sign of a good humanist education, but of the incapacity to respect the barriers between the work of art and the viewer, between inanimate matter subjected to the laws of physics and the autonomy of the viewing subject. This barrier would become the foundation of Kant's aesthetics. On the other side, reactions that used to be associated with *enargeia* continue to occur and to be discussed, but in a very different context. Isolated from the artistic features that caused them, they became the object, in the course of the eighteenth century, of the new

disciplines of ethnography or religious studies. They are now classified as the primitive expressions, incapable of development, of the first phases of humanity, and therefore unfit to be considered by aesthetics or academic art history. If Western viewers indulged in them, they were dismissed as inappropriate. Hegel for instance, in his *Ästhetik*, would dismiss the archeologist Carl August Böttiger's fondling ('Herumtatscheln') of female marble statues as the somewhat unhealthy negation of the spiritual dimension of art.<sup>280</sup> In the next chapters we will see how such reactions continued to occur, despite their banishment from the realm of the museum and the academy. We will also see how in the decades around 1900 the themes treated so far as issues in the reactions by individuals to works of art, will return, this time conceived on a universal scale, as phases in the development of mankind, in the work of Aby Warburg.



## PLATES





1 Crouching Aphrodite, Roman copy after Greek original of the third century BC, marble, H. 0.78 m., Paris, Musée du Louvre

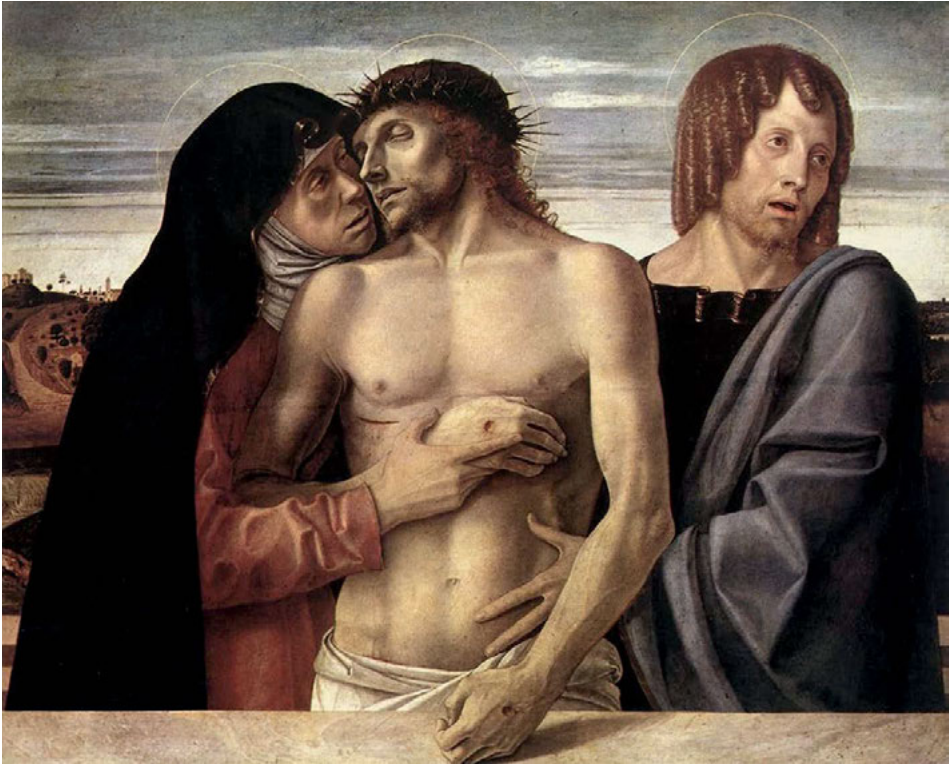


12 Sebastiano Ricci (1609–1734), *Perseus slaying Phineas* (Perseus confronting Phineas with the head of Medusa), circa 1705–1710, oil on canvas, 65 by 80 cm., Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum

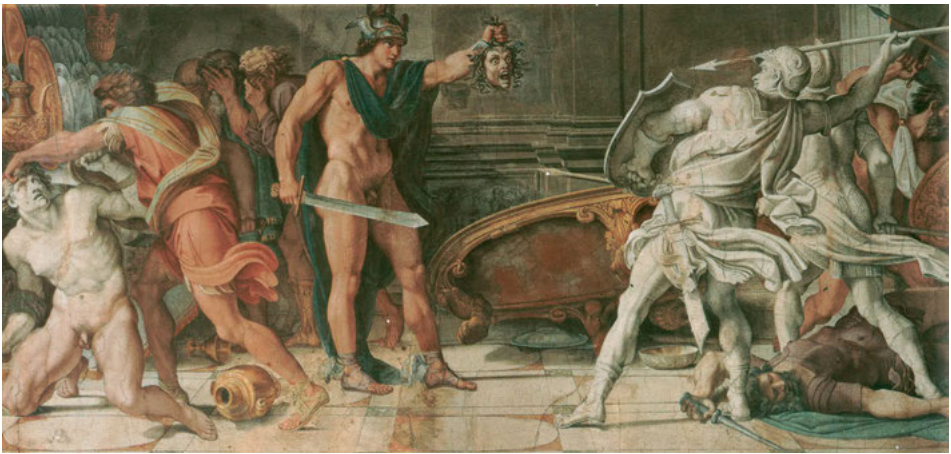




13 Polynesian war god, probably eighteenth century, wicker framework with feathers, dogs' teeth and shells, H. 1.07 m., London, British Museum



18 Giovanni Bellini (1433–1516), *Brera Pietà*, 1460, tempera on wood, 86 by 107 cm.  
Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera



19 Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), *Perseus and Medusa*, fresco, 1597, Rome, Palazzo Farnese

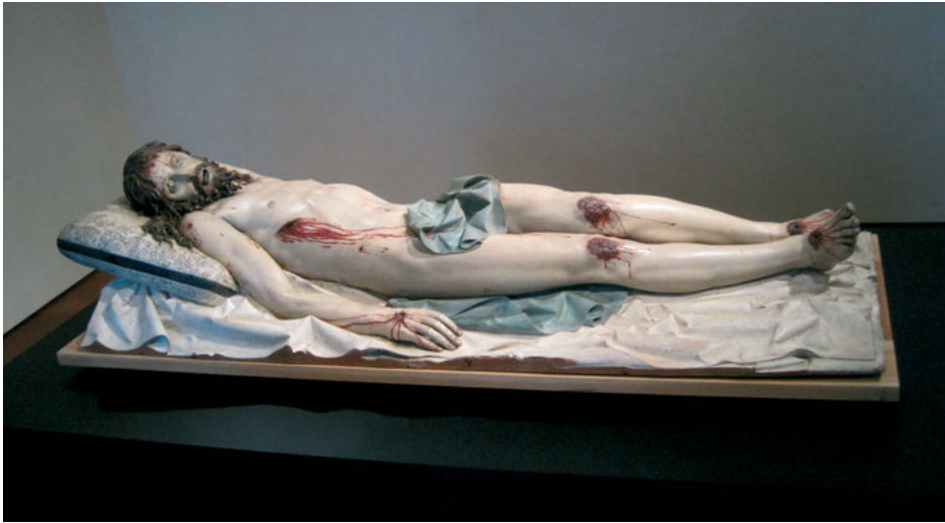


20 Luca Giordano (1634–1705), *Perseus petrifying Phineus*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, 285 by 366 cm., Naples, Museo di Capodimonte

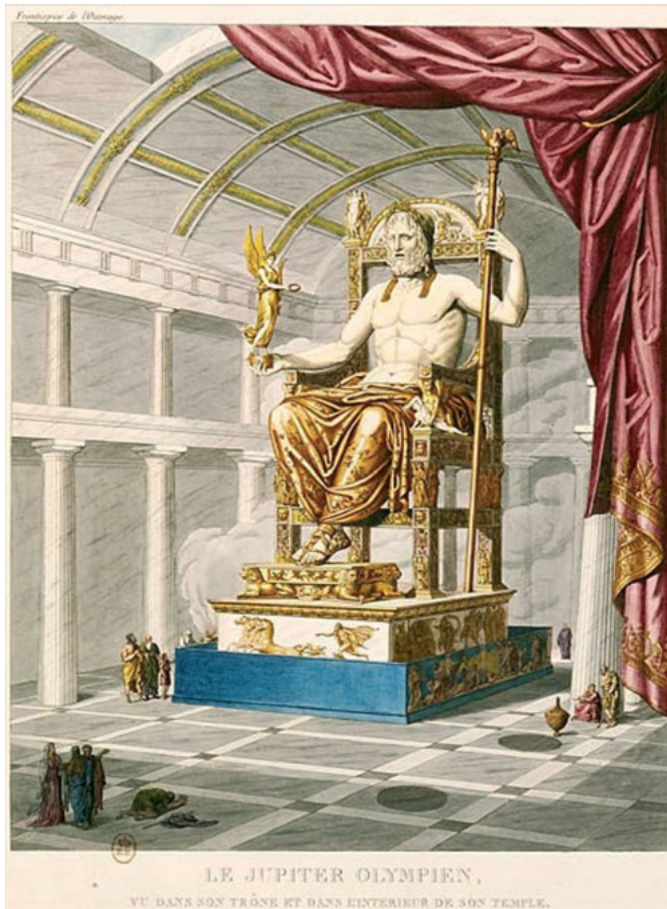


21 Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) (attr.), Head of Medusa, c. 1630, marble, H. 40 cm., Rome, Capitoline Musea





39 Gregorio Fernández (1576–1636), Statue of the dead Christ, polychrome wood, glass, and ivory, L. 1.60 m, Seville, Iglesia de San Miguel y San Julián



40 Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, *Le Jupiter Olympien* [..], ouvrage qui comprend un essai sur le goût de la sculpture polychrome, Paris: Firmin Didot 1814, frontispice, Paris, Institut National d'Histoire del'Art

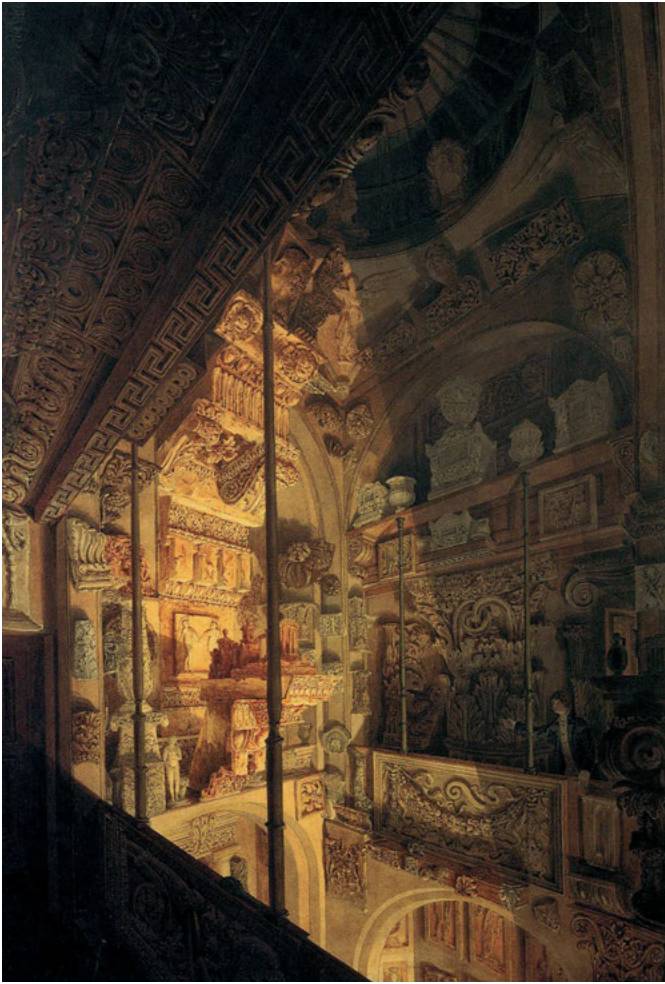


61 Hubert Robert (1733–1808), *La violation des caveaux des rois dans la basilique de Saint-Denis*, en octobre 1793, c. 1793, oil on wood, 54 × 64 cm, Paris, Musée Carnavalet



65 Joseph Gandy (1771–1843), *the Bank of England as Ruin*, watercolour, 1830, London, Soane Museum



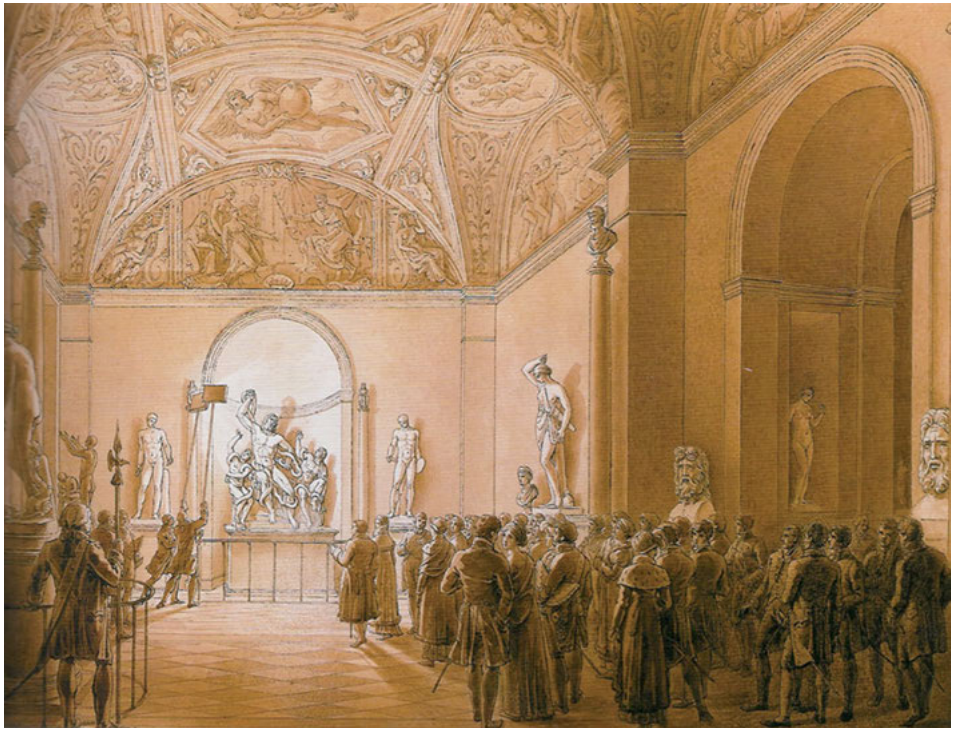


68 Joseph Gandy (1771–1843), Sir John Soane's, town house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, 1810–1820, plaster cast room, watercolour by Joseph Gandy, London, Soane Museum





74 Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494), scene from the Sassetti Chapel showing Poliziano and his pupils, 1485, fresco, Florence, Santa Trinità



78 Benjamin Zix (1772–1811), Napoleon visits the recently arrived Laocoön group in the Louvre by torch light, 1810, watercolour, Paris, Musée du Louvre



80 Hunting cave lions, detail of the large frieze in the end chamber of Chauvet cave, c. 30.000 BCE, charcoal on rock

